

An Offering to the Rich.

A Christmas Story
By Alice Louise Lee.

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OWEN HARD sat in room 30 of the Hard block. He called the place his office and himself a real estate agent, but it was no secret in the city that the only real estate he had time to attend to was his own and that his callers were people who came to ask favors, not to leave fees.

It was the afternoon before Christmas, and the dull December sun shone in at the window and fell on Hard stretched out in a big leather padded armchair beside the table.

He was a man nearing middle life. His dark hair was plentifully streaked with gray, while his forehead had fallen into heavy lines, which gave his face when in repose an expression of ill nature that belied a disposition singularly generous and open. His hands were crowded into his pockets. "It's



HE STILL GAZED OUT OF THE WINDOW, where they have been for the greater part of the week," he said grimly to Yemans, a friend and a neighboring lawyer, who sat on the table and swung one foot.

Yemans laughed. "A fellow has to pay dearly these days, Hard, for being rich. Still, I shouldn't object to paying the price myself."

An odd expression crossed Hard's face. He drew himself up and, clasping his hands behind his head, looked fixedly out of the window.

"Cheer up, old man," said Yemans, still laughing. "Your money brings you a sort of fame. I don't believe there has been a fair, charity show, festival, pauper's death, failure or any other public event in this town for years but what Owen S. Hard has been called on to pull some one or something out of a hole, and he always does it, too," added Yemans heartily.

Hard did not smile. He still gazed out of the window. "Would you believe, Yemans, that for ten years I have never"— He suddenly checked his speech and then spoke as though to himself. "If I were a society man, probably I'd receive soft pillows and such trash, but"—

Yemans started. "What on earth are you driving at?"

"Nothing, nothing," exclaimed Hard impatiently. "I'm only stupidly thinking aloud."

He shook himself, arose and began pacing the floor with his arms folded behind him. Yemans whistled a bit and slid off the table. He yawned and picked up his hat. "I say, here's a pun. It's hard luck to be rich, but it's always been Hard's luck. There! A merry Christmas to you, old fellow." And Yemans left, slamming the door behind him.

Hard dropped into his big chair again and ran his fingers through his heavy hair. In the hall were merry calls, the shutting of office doors and the general stir of an early closing up of business to which the owner of the block paid no attention. He leaned his elbow on the table and thought, while his forehead fell into its heaviest lines.

Presently there was a stir outside his door, followed by a faint rap. "Come," he shouted, but evidently the noise drowned his voice. The knock was repeated. He arose and rather ungraciously opened the door.

Before him stood a queer combination. It did not take up much room either in height or breadth. Had it been twice as tall his eyes could have looked over it at Yemans just stepping into the elevator. Yemans was laughing and thrusting his hands significantly into his pockets. The elevator boy was grinning. The dentist, locking his door, was chucking and winking at a doctor ringing for the ascending elevator.

Then Hard, half weary, half affable and wholly amused, said, "Come in."

The combination entered. It consisted of a morsel of a boy, pulling after him a small red express wagon which

was filled to overflowing with something carefully covered with an old bedquilt. At the tail of the cart were two upright sticks, from which was draped a piece of thin black cloth pinned to the bedquilt halfway down the cart.

Hard surveyed the procession as it crossed the floor. "He is got up regardless of his feelings for the purpose of appealing to mine," was his thought as his hand involuntarily wandered to his pocket.

The boy pulled the rattling express cart across the soft rug to the desk and laid the tongue down carefully. "I'm Robert Allison Broxley," he announced, working his hat loose from his head and bowing gravely.

Hard returned the bow and followed in the wake of the cart, feeling rather superfluous as a host. "I am glad to meet you, Robert Allison Broxley," he said solemnly. "I am Owen S. Hard."

The child regarded him steadily with great black eyes set in dark rings which extended low on his cheeks. The face ought to have been the face of a mere baby had not responsibility claimed its owner early and made of him a premature man.

"I knew who you was," Robert Allison Broxley said calmly. His face looked troubled, and Hard detected a suspicion of tears around the long black lashes and a quiver in the chin for which he could not account. Robert's next words, however, confirmed him in the idea which had led his hand to his pocket.

"You are rich, ain't you?" the little chap asked, laying hold of the black cloth at the tail of the cart. He asked in a queer voice which seemed to invite denial.

"Most people take it for granted that I am," answered Hard dryly.

Robert did not understand the hidden meaning. His face fell, and he struggled with some emotion which caused him to draw his coat sleeve across his eyes. "Then nobody don't give you nothing for a present, does they?" he asked.

Hard looked at the boy curiously and said what he had interrupted himself in saying to Yemans a few moments before. "No, Robert; no one has made me a present in ten years."

"I'm sorry for you," muttered Robert, and his hand again sought the black cloth. He raised one corner and peered under. The sight evidently made him still more unwilling to uncover the cart. "I'm sorry for you," he repeated, holding down the corner of the cloth. "Won't you git a sack of flour or clothes or broth or fruit or shoes or nothing tomorrow from nobody?" anxiously.

"No, Robert," said Hard solemnly. "Probably no one will give me a single gift."

"You must have an awful bad time," sighed Robert.

"Well, I don't have a very good time always on Christmas day," agreed Hard. "Do you?"

The child brightened. "Oh, yes 'cause everybody is so good and gives us lots and lots of things."

"I never have," hazarded Hard, "and I am somebody."

Robert looked up, his eyes growing wider. "Why, you know you've been the goodest of all. That's why"— He glanced at the cart and checked himself. "You give my papa a fun'ral, a very nice fun'ral, too," cheerfully, "and you sent us a hen for tomorrow. There's better pickin' on a rooster, you know, but the hen is very nice and fat, most as big as that rooster you sent on Thanksgivin' day. Hain't you no hens left for yourself?" anxiously.

"Funerals, hens," repeated Hard musingly. He had given so many funerals and hens on request that one more or less made no impression on him. "I give it up, little man. You have the better of me. You seem to know more of what I do than I remember myself, so we will change the subject. What have you there?" pointing to the cart.

Robert hesitated and winked fast. "I brought something—that is, I got something to give you a lift."

"A lift?" repeated Hard, mystified.

Robert nodded and removed the black cloth gingerly, saying apologetically at the same time, "You see, you darsent let the sun up to their eyes ever," and revealed to Hard's astonished gaze two tiny dimpled faces crowned with yellow silky hair. Two heads sleepily moved and two pairs of deep blue eyes half opened.

"Twins!" ejaculated Hard. He leaned over the children and projected a finger at the one nearest him. The baby closed her soft fingers around it and looked up with an engaging display of smiles and dimples.

"Two twins," corrected Robert "That's her," pointing to the one clinging to Hard, "and this is him. Yours is half."

At this point Robert gave a decided sniff and reached for his old hat. Out of the crown he drew an unhemmed rag and applied the same to his nose.

"Mine? Half of what?" asked the astonished Hard.

"Half of these," Robert leaned over the twins, and his voice choked. "You may have him," touching the baby boy, "or her," touching the baby girl, "but I guess mebbe you better take him and leave me her 'less you want her awful bad. It's a lift to you."

"Oh, I see—a gift!" and Hard sat down weakly beside his gift. There was a queer expression about his eyes. He leaned over and, resting his elbow on his knees and his head in his hand, was silent for a moment. "Her" carried his finger to her mouth and began to suck it with apparent relish and many little gurglings.

"What would your mother say if I kept half the twins?" he asked abruptly.

"Of course she'd mebbe be sorry, but they don't belong to her. They're mine."

"Not hers?" echoed Hard.

"Nope," smothering a sob. "They're every bit of 'em mine. Mamma never had 'em 'cause first they was papa's and just before you give him a fun'ral globe. You know what the peanut is, of course?"

"Yep."

"They are eaten baked, and they are eaten raw. They are eaten on the street and in the house. They are eaten at yard caucuses and at marriages and funerals. Doctors have always said they were a good thing, but how good no one knew until I compounded a tonic of them. My dear sir, I can prove to you that one bottle of the tonic has the same nutrition as a whole carcass of fresh beef."

"Gee whiz?"

"It strengthens more than a barrel of wine."

"By thunder!"

"It will make man or woman put on five pounds of fat per week."

"You don't say!"

"The doctors and the hospitals will throw aside every other tonic and accept mine. What does Lillian Russell say? She weighed 185 pounds before taking the peanut tonic and was supposed to be going into a decline. In two weeks she weighed 210 pounds and was looking around for the ax to chop wood. What has kept the two senators from New York state alive for the last month? What has braced Senator Foraker up anew? Why has the czar of Russia ceased to talk of resigning? Why is the Chicago beef trust trembling in its shoes? I tell you, sir, we have the grandest thing on the face of this green earth, and if you don't make \$10,000,000 out of it in three years I'll be disappointed in you. As I said, I want you for treasurer."

"And, by gum, you can have me!"

Uncle Reuben's Salary.

"That's right. That's the way I like to hear a man speak up. Your salary for the first year, while we are getting under way, will only be a hundred thousand dollars, but after that it may go to half a million. All you'll have to do is to count the money as it comes in and goes out and be careful that you don't pay out any thousand dollar bills for hundreds."

"Say, it's great; it's great!" whispered Uncle Reuben as he walked around and rubbed his hands together.

"It is greater than great," added the major as he also walked. "You may want to know where we shall get our peanuts from. Not from the American trust, you can bet. I have leased 5,000,000 acres of the great Sahara desert

to grow them on. Fifty bushels to the acre, and that makes 250,000,000 bushels of peanuts. We shall have our own bottle factories and raise our corks."

"Lord, what a head you have got on you!"

"Kings, emperors, czars, presidents, dictators, lords, dukes, barons, counts, opera singers and actresses to advertise us, and behind them all the doctors come trailing in; also all the newspapers. Can you beat it? Can you match Major Crofoot?"

"Shake hands, major," said Uncle Reuben as he held out his paw.

"And can you go to work on Monday?" queried the promoter after shaking.

"I'll be on hand or perish."

"Very well. You may indorse that check and leave it with me as security that you will show up. It's a mere formality, you know. Turn the check over and write your name there."

"And I'll make—make"—

"You'll have \$5,000,000 in the bank before another buckwheat crop is off. And now, as this is my busy day"—

"I'll take a skate and show up Monday morning."

The major sat down and pressed his hands to his thumping heart and longed for a dose of brandy. He gave Uncle Reuben ten minutes to get out of the neighborhood and then wrote his own name on the check and went over to the bank and showed it at the paying teller in a careless way.

"Good only for paper rags," said the teller as he shoved it back, with a grin.

Uncle Reuben was on top. He had soaked the man who was seeking to soak him.

M. QUAD.

Strong In Death.

Towne—Well, Hussel is gone, poor fellow! He just worked himself to death. He was always in such a hurry!

Browne—Yes, and they say he was out of breath when he died.—Philadelphia Press.

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